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ABSTRACT

The way in which university academic service units evolved historically is considered, a theoretical framework is outlined representing the present organizational relationship between the managerial perspective of these units and the university policy-making perspective, and a model is proposed for integrating academic service units into university policy formulation activity using institutional research as the primary organizational facilitator. Examples of academic service units are admissions, the registrar, financial aid, and institutional research, but they can include any professional-staff unit that deals directly with the curricular sector of university administration. These units directly affect the university policy-making process in the way they interpret and implement policy decisions, and if they are not integrated into the process, the potential exists for the formulation of piecemeal and ineffective policies. It is suggested that academic service unit professionals are differentiated from university policy makers and among each other based on functional roles within the university's operational framework, and that a coordinator is needed to maintain intergroup communication through the exchange of systematic information. The proposed model would enable overall university goals, policies, and plans to be defined utilizing the insight and information of all major participant groups in the policy formulation process. Feedback to goal setters by the operational or managerial professionals is included in the process. It is suggested that institutional researchers can help define issues and policies based on a university-wide perspective, and that they provide technical understanding to develop and evaluate the data base. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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ACADEMIC SERVICE UNITS AND UNIVERSITY POLICY FORMULATION: A FUNCTIONAL SURVIVAL MODEL FOR THE 1980s

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Mary Corcoran
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ABSTRACT

ACADEMIC SERVICE UNITS AND UNIVERSITY POLICY FORMULATION:

A FUNCTIONAL SURVIVAL MODEL

Historically, academic service roles evolved in response to internal and external demands on the organization. Following World War II these pressures produced large academic service units, differentiated by function and staffed by professional middle managers. In many ways, these units directly effect the university policy making process in the way they interpret and implement policy decisions. If they are not integrated into the process, the potential exists for the formulation of piecemeal and ineffective policies. This paper proposes a model for integrating these units based on establishing a set of inter-related contexts through which quantitative and qualitative information can be developed into policies and implementation strategies. Because of prior organizational functions institutional research is suggested as the facilitator of this process within each context.

ACADEMIC SERVICE UNITS AND UNIVERSITY POLICY FORMULATION:

A FUNCTIONAL SURVIVAL MODEL FOR THE 1980s

Introduction

The first section of this paper will discuss, within a historical context, the general manner in which university academic service units evolved. From this background discussion, a theoretical framework representing the present organizational relationship between the managerial perspective of these units and the university policy making perspective will be outlined. Based on this framework a model will be proposed for integrating academic service units into university policy formulation activity, using institutional research as the primary organizational facilitator.

The professional management framework of most institutions evolved as a direct response to the expansionist pressures of the post-World War II baby boom as well as thirty years of federal agendas. Organizationally, the professional administrative units on most campuses continue to maintain the differentiated and unintegrated bureaucratic form which grew out of the high rates of institutional growth which now appear to be an artifact of the middle thirty years of this century. As one consequence of this present structure, institutions of higher education could experience a significant administrative problem with respect to adapting planning and policy making to changing environmental situations.

These units represent the functional mechanisms through which the university organization interacts with its external clients and internal constituents. In a period of abundant resources it might be acceptable to maintain a policy and planning perspective limited to the experience of central administration policy makers because of a lack of systematic procedures for integrating the insight and information capabilities represented by these units. If, however, the next twenty year period represents a slowing or even an actual decline in the

student demand on higher education as well as lessening rates of increase in the resources available, the lack of integration among these areas could prove disastrous to effective policy making.

The question needs to be raised as to how effectively the present model of university planning and policy support, born in an era of expansion, can be expected to respond to the realities and demands of retrenchment. It is the intention of this paper to explore that issue from the point of view that institutional research can offer a nexus for reformulating the functional academic service areas into an integrated body for the direct support of the university policy making process.

Background: The Development of Academic Service Units

Operationally, university academic service units can generally be characterized as functional organizational entities, staffed by professional higher education managers (or "middle managers" as termed by Scott, 1979) which support the academic functioning of an institution. Examples of such units are admissions, the registrar, financial aid, and institutional research, but they can include any professional staffed unit which deals directly with the curricular sector of university administration. In most institutions, these units are differentiated by function (both from the faculty and from each other), bureaucratic in their organizational form, and operate on a routine or ad hoc time perspective. Their staffs are generally trained in some technical specialty. Essentially, these units make up the middle management superstructure of the university organization.

This professional university-wide academic support bureaucracy developed directly out of the rapid expansion in numbers and types of students which appeared on campuses after the Second World War (Appleton, et al., 1978). As a result, it has been specifically oriented toward the governmental agendas and social phenomena prevalent during the period after 1945 (Keppel, 1980). Such

functions as financial aid, admissions, and the registrar (as well as institutional research) may have had their actual origins in faculty activity prior to this period, but it was the rapid expansion of the student clientele in terms of numbers and diversity after World War II which led to the differentiation of these units into large, professionally staffed, often bureaucratic units (Scott, 1980, and Larkin, 1979).

Functionally, academic support units represent traditional faculty responsibilities within a college. Registrars can trace their ancestors back to the collegiate models of the middle ages; however, it was not until the late nineteenth century that faculty roles which we think of today as academic support services began to emerge in any formal sense (Scott, 1979). When these roles appeared they generally came about in response to external societal pressures or increases in enrollment and student demands for service which undifferentiated faculty members in a college were unable (or unwilling) to provide (Scott, 1979). Essentially, these units have always had a single purpose, to provide a functional means for conducting specific transactions between the traditional curriculum and the college's students or external clients (Scott, 1979).

At the turn of the twentieth century academic services were provided by some of the faculty as an adjunct to their teaching responsibilities. This was possible chiefly because there was no requirement in 1900 to understand the complexities of government regulations, admissions marketing models, or integrated academic data bases in order to fulfill these functions. Over time, as university organizations grew larger and more intricate, the faculty began to rapidly narrow their involvement in academic service or they no longer considered the delivery of such services to be their responsibility (Appleton, et al., 1978, p. 372).

As institutions grew in size and expanded their missions, new and greater supplies of money and students had to be found. More specialists were required

to do jobs that formerly were done more leisurely (Scott, 1979). New levels of accountability were imposed by local, state, and federal government agencies. For all of these requirements, there were auditors to be met and forms to be filed (Scott, 1979). The growth in federal programs made it possible for larger segments of society to attend post-secondary education, but it also brought about a huge and rapid increase in the number and professional nature of college middle managers (Scott, 1979).

Academic Service Units and University Policy Formulation: The Overall Problem

The problem which this represents for planning and policy making lies in the implied separation of responsibility for these activities into two independently functioning, not necessarily related entities. On the one hand, a traditional group of faculty colleagues continues to preside over institutional and academic goal setting through policy committees (as well as the simple fact that most college presidents and other policy makers see themselves as being part of the community of scholars rather than the community of professional bureaucrats). On the other hand, the new, more technically oriented professional middle managers in the academic service (and other) areas carry out the day-to-day implementation of planned policies through the institution's operating and management units and, by their actions, control their interpretation and implementation.

The differentiation within the organization between faculty, with their general control over institutional goal setting and institutional managers with their direct control over policy interpretation and implementation should become more of a pressing problem for institutions as they face the realities of the 1980s. This should be the case simply because resource stringency will not be as tolerant of ineffective planning and policy making as in the past.

The distinction between the effectiveness and efficiency with which organizations adapt to environmental change is central to this discussion. Efficiency involves performing a task as well as possible in relation to some predetermined

criterion. Effectiveness involves identifying what should be done and ensuring that the chosen criteria are achieved. There is often a conflict between effectiveness and efficiency within an organization because effectiveness requires adaptation and learning, while efficiency involves a narrowing of focus and a minimization of effort and cost.

It is an arguable assumption that over the past thirty years the academic service units on most campuses have performed their narrowly defined roles efficiently. Whether they are now in a position to effectively contribute to the overall welfare of the organization is another question. In many ways the academic service areas of an institution can be seen as the functional mechanisms by which it interacts with internal constituents and external clients. If these units and the professionals who staff them are disconnected from direct involvement with the process by which policies and plans and their strategies for implementation are formulated, the potential exists for making long term decisions with considerable impact on the institution without a basis in the contextual information. Even worse, it is likely that these policies and plans will be implemented in a disjointed or piecemeal fashion based on the individual interpretations of unit managers.

The key to effective planning and policy making lies in the ability to tie organizational goal setting to decision making with respect to overall strategies for implementing goals. If this activity is allowed to take place in two differentiated areas within the organization the possibility for efficiently creating unintegrated, highly disjointed, and ineffective policy will continue to exist.

In order to better bring the discussion of the role of academic service units with respect to university policy formulation into focus, the university policy making process needs to be more precisely characterized. Policy making can be described in terms of three basic criteria:

> The level of generality or abstraction of the decision; the amount of internal and external organizational space affected by the decision; and the length of time for which the decision will hold. The combination of these three dimensions enables us to distinguish among: 1.) policy making as the formulation of substantive goals and objectives; 2.) policy making as the formulation of procedures and devices for achieving goals and evaluating performance; 3.) routine administration or the application of existing policies to on-going operations; and 4.) residual, ad hoc decisions affecting organizational space without temporal implications beyond the immediate event. The first two categories of decision making are clearly in the area of policy formulation (Katz and Kahn, 1978, p. 477).

The key point to be made is that policy is not simply the product of a deliberate consideration of long run problems facing the organization. Policy is also created by day-to-day decisions often made on an ad hoc basis by administrators rather than by designated policy makers. The criterion for judging whether a policy has been made is whether structural change in the organization has been produced by the accumulation of administrative decisions, even though their makers were not consciously trying to determine policy (Katz and Kahn, 1978, p. 479). It should be emphasized, then, that in addition to more obvious substantive decisions about the nature of organizational goals, policy is also made by decisions about the general strategy for attaining these goals or changing existing ones (Katz and Kahn, 1978, p. 479). Specifically, rules or strategies that commit the organization to follow one path toward achieving its goals and not another, rules according to which it handles external problems, and meets internal ones and assesses its progress, are matters of policy and meet the policy making criteria of spatial and temporal effects (Katz and Kahn, 1978, p. 6). The basic policy formulation process rests on achieving the proper mix

of coordination of policy goals through planning and coordination of policy implementation through feedback (Katz and Kahn, 1978).

Notwithstanding decisions about organizational goals which might be at a high level of abstraction, substantive decisions about implementation strategies also affect organizational space, over time, and are as much a part of policy formulation as goal setting. As a result, systematic planning requires both goal setting and implementation strategies. Goal setting is often visible and clearly understood as being part of the systematic higher education planning process. Policy implementation strategies are less visible, and less well understood as being part of planning. As a result, these strategies are often formulated in a piecemeal and unintegrated fashion. How the entire planning and policy formulation process can be brought together in a more comprehensive and integrated design will be discussed in the final section.

From Differentiation to Integration: An Organizational Process Model

It should be stressed at this point that, based on the background presented in the prior section, the model which is being proposed here rests on the assumption that two sets of planning and policy making groups exist on campus. One of these is oriented toward longer term goal setting and the other is oriented toward interpretation and implementation and that a difference does exist between them both in perspective (values and norms) as well as in the type of information (feedback) necessary to them to fulfill their perceived roles in the organization. However, this might not be the case on all campuses or, more likely, this might not be a problem for all institutions.

The very first condition which has to be met before any process of integration can take place is the perception that a discrepancy exists (in the case of the policy making process). Some decision maker must have the sense that "things are falling through the cracks", even if this is a vague or undirected feeling. If there is a belief on campus that the policy making process as it is presently

constituted could be made more effective and that substantive steps need to be taken to accomplish this, then the organizational development model outlined in this section can be of use. The organizational development process model on which this section is based was developed by Lawrence and Lorsch (1969) as part of their work in developing organizations. It is based on five stages; diagnosis, design, action planning, implementation, and evaluation.

As initiating steps, diagnosis and design go together. Essentially, these stages amount to an analysis of the environmental or task demands facing the organization. From this analysis a "normative prescription", regarding which organizational characteristics provide the best fit with task requirements. can be prepared (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1969, p. 19). This amounts to a descriptive diagnosis of the current state of organizational affairs; how differentiated the organizational structure is and what the options are for change. In essence, diagnosis provides a picture of the present organizational reality while the design phase sets the targets for change (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1969)

Once these two steps are out of the way, action planning and implementation can take place. Action planning involves an identification of the key actors in the effort, their needs, their influence and leverages, and the variables which they can most readily affect. From this step a set of alternative plans of action can be prepared which show promise of altering the performance of the system in the desired direction (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1969). These are usually of three types: "1.) of an educational nature--that is, designed to change the expedtations of contributors, 2.) of a structural nature--that is, a modification of the division of labor, of the planned communications network, etc., or 3.) a change in the basic transactional strategy of the organization" (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1968, pp. 21-22). Following this, the implementation stage can take place. This stage involves translating the selected plan into actual behavioral steps based on a specific scheme which usually involves

phased time sequences and intermittent checks on progress.

These checks lead to the final stage which is that of evaluation, follow-up and feedback. In this stage the change goals are compared to actual results and this variance is diagnosed. This feeds to the beginning of another cycle. Change goals should never be treated as ends in themselves, they should always be seen as the means for addressing the original discrepancy (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1969). In essence, then, the process proposed by Lawrence and Lorsch is one of open and adaptive organizational evolution in which the organization systematically diagnoses itself, plans change actions, implements change actions, and evaluates the results.

The implication from the first section of the paper has been that this rational behavioral change model will not work within the present structure because the process requires integrating the perceptions of all groups associated with planning and policy making. Academic service unit professionals are differentiated from university policy makers and (of equal importance perhaps) among each other based on functional roles within the university's operational framework. This differentiation has far-reaching consequences for approaching the integration of the policy making and planning process because each major subset of the organization can be predicted to have its own norms and values built up around its primary function. This is likely to cause them to set different priorities and use different criteria for their recommendations about policy as well as the ways in which they implement these policy decisions.

Consequently, in order to be able to resolve what amounts to differences in perceptual set among major functional groups in the process, the organization must designate an integrator or coordinator. This coordinator's role should be based on the ability to maintain inter-group communication through the exchange of systematic information.

It is this organizational role which institutional research is probably best prepared to play among all of the various units on campus. Historically, institutional research has had two operational roles, data management and institutional reporting. Over time, the evaluation and planning mandate has been added to create an office which oversees both the organization's data flow mechanisms and administers the systematic processes by which central decision makers communicate with both faculty and staff. In many ways these two functions characterize the communicator's/coordinator's role.

The overall process suggested by Lawrence and Lorsch requires the capacity to both bring diagnostic and prescriptive analysis to bear on the issue of the present organizational reality of the institution and to use this knowledge in the establishment of targets for change. Through the planning and evaluation orientation which has grown up over the past decade, institutional researchers have become intimately involved with the university level management and policy makers in the identification of organizational variables which measure performance. In essence, as a profession institutional research is in the unique position of having exposure to both the planning and policy perspective as well as the technical perspective of professional managers in the academic service areas.

This dual set of perceptions is very important to the process being proposed. The integration model suggests a set of specific steps for adapting policies and plans to changing organizational needs based on objective analysis. In this, institutional research can serve as a passive facilitator of the overall process by being the direct informational and analytic nexus with respect to environmental and contextual data which comes from the functional organizational interfaces (e.g., academic service units).

However, this is only half the process. More importantly, the milieu for integrating decision making with respect to goals and implementation strategies

needs to be created. This is the larger, more active role of institutional research in the facilitation of the process. In order to respond effectively to change, institutional policy decision makers need timely information with respect to present organizational functioning. The academic service areas of the institution are essentially the interfaces between the organization and its various constituencies and contain such information. However, the process of moving data from these units to the central policy makers is not simply a matter of setting up rigid information systems based on yesterday's perceptions of decision support needs.

The organizational development process suggested by Lawrence and Lorsch calls for the capacity to bring meaningful information to bear to portray the present organizational situation and to use this knowledge in the establishment of realistic goals for organizational development and change. The key to setting realistic goals lies in having the capacity to tie not only quantitative data but other types of non-quantitative insight from the environment into the decision making needs of central policy makers. This must take place on an evolutionary and dynamic basis. As has been stressed, in order to make the process integrated and comprehensive all relevant groups (e.g., all groups with interpretive insight to add, because of their roles in the organization with respect to policy making) need to be involved in the actual development of goals standards and criteria on which evaluation of progress will be based.

Essentially, what is being proposed as a final step is that the coordinating entity (in this case proposed as institutional research) be responsible for establishing and overseeing a set of contexts in which the interchange of information of various levels of quantitative and qualitative specificity can be exchanged (see Figure One). This is an open-ended communication process in which issues can be defined and criteria for evaluation developed by all groups directly involved in policy making and planning. It should be emphasized that

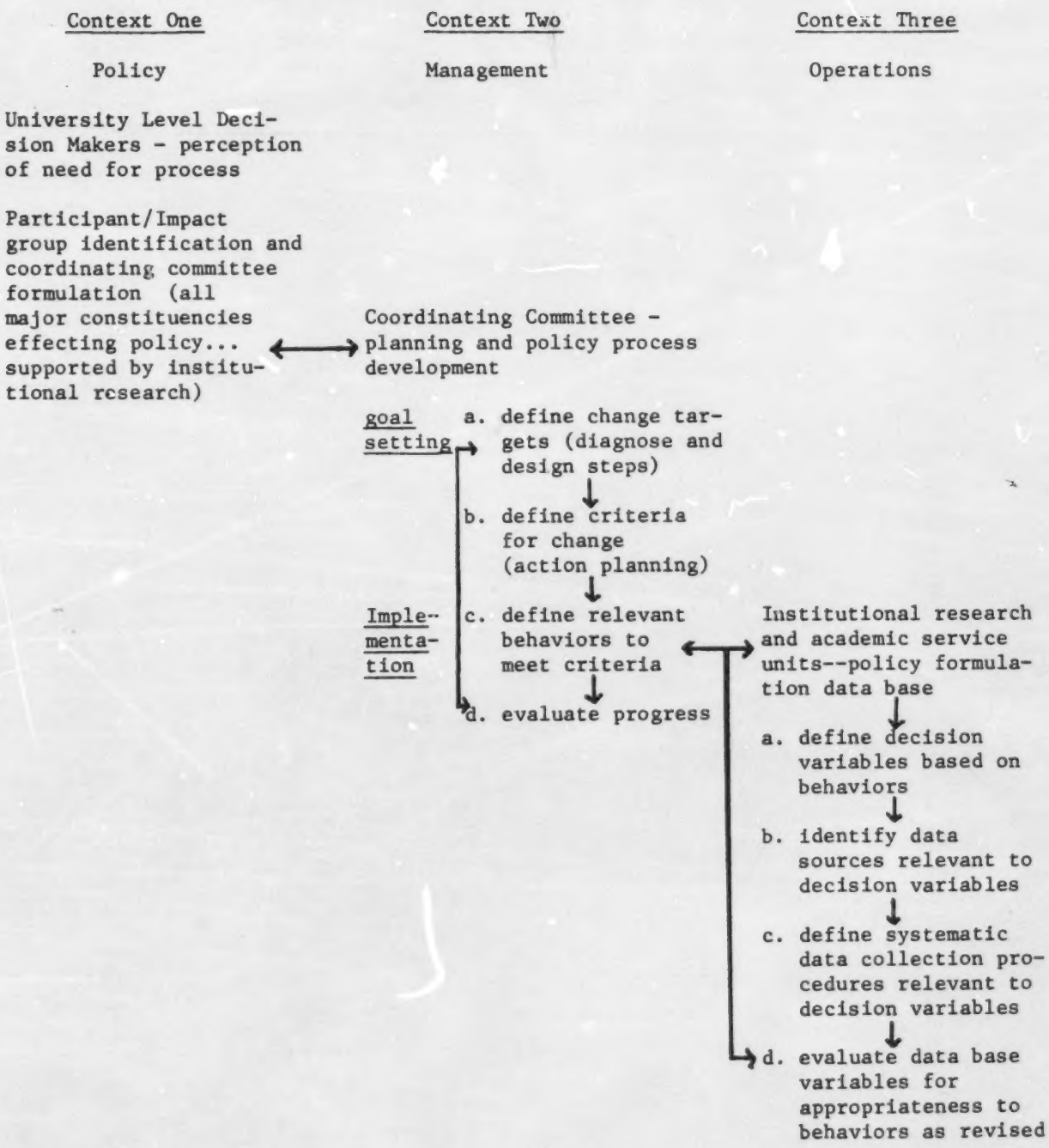
in order to insure that this takes place in an integrated fashion an on-going process of issue and criteria definition needs to be undertaken (under the sponsorship of the central policy maker who feels the need for enhanced planning and policy making support) involving all major groups effecting policy. This group process can then be tied directly to the support of academic policy making within the organizational development framework outlined by Lawrence and Lorsch. Figure One summarizes the proposed conceptual dimensions of this process. These dimensions are labeled contexts because it is assumed that one occurs within the other. Essentially, the scope and functional relationships of these contexts represent Anthony's (1965) three levels of university administrative activity (policy making, management, operations).

As has been emphasized in this discussion, to create the first context a university level policy maker (the president, a vice president, etc.) must perceive a need for more effective planning and policy making mechanisms in the institution. From this perception, a coordinating group made up of participants who have an impact on the policy process ought to be identified. This group whould include both policy decision makers and policy implementers (and should, by implication, be constituted from both the faculty and academic service staff).

Within the second context, the coordinating group undertakes the organizational development process steps outlined earlier. That is, change targets are identified (e.g., present organizational realities characterized and change goals identified) and criteria for change defined (e.g., directionality and degree of change to meet goals). The behavioral steps necessary and measures to indicate achievement of desired objectives should be planned and an implementation strategy laid out. Evaluation of performance based on criteria can then occur.

Two important features of this process should be noted. In the first

Figure One


Context One
Policy
Context Two
Management
Context Three
Operations
University Level Decision Makers - perception of need for process
Participant/Impact group identification and coordinating committee formulation (all major constituencies effecting policy... supported by institutional research)
Coordinating Committee - planning and policy process development
goal setting
a. define change targets (diagnose and design steps)
b. define criteria for change (action planning)
Implementation
c. define relevant behaviors to meet criteria
d. evaluate progress
Institutional research and academic service units--policy formulation data base
a. define decision variables based on behaviors
b. identify data sources relevant to decision variables
c. define systematic data collection procedures relevant to decision variables
d. evaluate data base variables for appropriateness to behaviors as revised

place, these stages can be roughly factored into Katz and Kahn's goal setting and implementation strategy categories. When the coordinating group involves all constituents affecting the planning process (e.g., goal setting and implementation) it will help insure that the planning activity is integrated from the start. Secondly, since the setting of change goals is a dynamic process, a feedback loop is implied from the evaluation of progress stage back to the diagnosis and design stage. Therefore, the process is on-going, with part of the implementation strategy based on setting formal census points throughout where the applicability of prior goals can be re-evaluated and perhaps altered in newer, more appropriate directions.

Because of the presence of this second factor, the third context is necessary. The development of the policy formulation data base should be seen as being a part of the dynamic process of organizational development. In this third context decision variables relevant to policy criteria are formulated on a university-wide basis. In this respect narrow functional distinctions based on unit roles can be eliminated because at the juncture between the formal policy making/planning process and the informational input from the academic service areas, all distinctions (differentiations) between these units can be washed out. That is,because of the university-wide focus of applicability of decision makers identified in the data element definition process, information items must be obtained and characterized on a standardized basis referenced to university-wide policy standards notwithstanding their functional source. Once the source of data is identified across units (or within an individual unit), based on the policy they are intended to address, those information items are brought into the policy formulation data base outside of the operational needs of the provider unit.

Quality control oversight of the data is crucial in this context and should rest with one information broker/coordinating unit (proposed here as institu-

tional research). Precise definition of data collection procedures by this coordinating unit will place the quality controls on the process. Finally, the coordinating unit should develop and evaluate the data base variables referenced to the design and implementation steps in the second context.

Conclusion

In general summary, it appears that university organizations have evolved (over time) a policy making and planning structure which is divided into two camps. On the one side, a set of traditional faculty colleagues meet to set university level policies with respect to academic programs, university goals and missions. On the other side, a professional management bureaucracy (which is differentiated by function both from the faculty and among each other) sets management goals, interprets university policy for implementation, and, in effect by its actions, controls the way in which the university interacts with its internal constituents and external clients.

This separation of function could be allowed to exist in a period of abundant resources; in fact, it might not necessarily even be noticed if all units were going about their business efficiently. However, in a period of tight resources, an institution with the ineffective and disjointed policy making and planning process which this model represents needs a more integrated approach in order to respond in a timely fashion to the implications of environmental change.

The model proposed in this paper would allow this to happen in the sense that two complex dimensions would be allowed to interact on a comprehensive (hopefully synergistic) basis. In the first place, overall university goals, policies, and plans could be defined utilizing the insight and information of all major participant groups in the policy formulation process. This would insure that the maximum degree of insight and information could be brought to bear in the policy decision making as well as maintaining a context for feedback

from and to the implementers of these decisions. Secondly, this would provide for the dynamic adaptation of policies to change based on timely interpretation and information from the environmental interfaces to the goal setters.

In both of these cases the integration process needs to be overseen by a coordinating entity which embodies the insight of both the goal setters and the managerial/operational professionals. It is necessary to have this dual perspective because of the pervasive information needs of the process. At the highest level of abstraction, the definition of issues and policies requires a process facilitator with a university-wide perspective. At the lowest level of operational detail, the development and evaluation of the data base to support discrepancy analysis, simulation modeling, and other quantitative needs requires a facilitator with deep technical understanding. Based on the background and general direction of its prior mandates, institutional research is perhaps uniquely qualified to undertake the process facilitator's/coordinator's role.

None of this is, of course, possible if the commitment to maintain an open, balanced, adaptive, and dynamic process is not there. However, if institutions faced with the demands of retrenchment understand the dimensions of this process and undertake it in good faith, integrated, effective, and adaptive policies and plans realistically responsive to the changing environment should be the result. For some institutions of the 1980s and 1990s, this could prove to be the marginal difference between extinction and survival.

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